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How School Leaders Navigate Neoliberal Education Reform: A Scoping Review

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Abstract: The aim with this scoping review is to provide an overview of research on school leaders' responses to neoliberal education reform. The review offers insights into how macro-level policies translate into micro-level experiences. By mapping existing studies on school leaders' lived experiences under neoliberal reforms, it provides valuable knowledge for policymakers, educational leaders, and researchers seeking to navigate and influence these ongoing transformations. This article employs a resistance theory perspective. I identified 21 articles that met all the inclusion criteria through the search. I undertook both a descriptive and a content analysis. The latter considers how school leaders navigate the reforms, and how they resisted them. The results show that resistance was manifested in terms such as speaking one's mind, irony, simulation and compliance. These studies exemplify some of the problems associated with the 'new professionalism' fashioned by educational policy seeking to steer the work of schools in a competitive school marketplace. Overall, the review underscores the transformative nature of neoliberal reforms on education and the imperative for using resistance and power theories to both help shed light on the sometimes soul- altering changes these initiatives can achieve and point to possible counter-discourse and counter-conduct.
Keywords: school leader; neoliberal education reform; resistance; scoping review

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Cómo los líderes escolares abordan la reforma educativa neoliberal: Una revisión exploratoria

Resumen: El propósito de esta revisión exploratoria es ofrecer una visión general de la investigación realizada sobre las respuestas de los líderes escolares a las reformas educativas neoliberales. Esta revisión aporta información sobre cómo se interpretan las políticas a nivel macro en las experiencias a nivel micro. Por lo tanto, al mapear los estudios existentes sobre las experiencias vividas por los líderes escolares durante las reformas neoliberales, aporta conocimiento valioso a los formuladores de políticas públicas, líderes educativos e investigadores que buscan abordar e influir en las transformaciones en curso. Este artículo adopta una perspectiva basada en la teoría de la resistencia. Durante la búsqueda, se identificaron 21 artículos que cumplían con todos los criterios de inclusión y se analizaron mediante análisis descriptivo y de contenido. Por lo tanto, buscamos comprender cómo los líderes escolares abordan y se resisten a estas reformas. Los resultados muestran que la resistencia se manifiesta en diferentes términos, como la expresión de pensamientos, la ironía, la simulación y el conformismo. Estos estudios previos proporcionan ejemplos de algunos de los problemas asociados con el "nuevo profesionalismo" promovido por las políticas educativas, que busca orientar el trabajo de las escuelas hacia un mercado educativo competitivo. En general, esta revisión destaca la naturaleza transformadora de las reformas educativas neoliberales y la necesidad de utilizar teorías de resistencia y poder para ayudar a aclarar, a veces de forma profundamente transformadora, cómo estas iniciativas pueden provocar y señalar posibles contradiscursos y comportamientos alternativos.

Palabras-clave: líder escolar; reforma educativa neoliberal; resistencia; revisión exploratoria

Como os líderes escolares navegam pela reforma educacional neoliberal: Uma revisão de escopo

Resumo: O objetivo desta revisão de escopo é oferecer uma visão geral de pesquisas realizadas com base nas respostas de líderes escolares às reformas educacionais neoliberais. Esta revisão contribue com percepções sobre como políticas à nível macro são interpretadas em experiências à nível micro. Desta forma, ao mapear estudos existentes sobre as experiências vividas por líderes escolares durante reformas liberais, ela contribui com conhecimentos valiosos para gestores de políticas públicas, líderes educacionais e pesquisadores que buscam se orientar e influenciar transformações em curso. Este artigo adota uma perspectiva baseada na teoria da resistência. Durante a busca foram identificados 21 artigos que se alinharam à todos os critérios de inclusão, e que foram analisados por meio de uma análise descritiva e de conteúdo. Sendo assim, buscou-se entender como os líderes escolares tanto se orientam nessas reformas quanto resistem à elas. Os resultados mostram que resistência se manifesta em diferentes termos, tais como: expressar o que pensa, ironia, simulação e conformidade. Esses estudos anteriores fornecem exemplos de alguns problemas associados ao “novo profissionalismo”, promovido por políticas educacionais, que procura direcionar o trabalho das escolas em direção à um mercado escolar competitivo. De modo geral, esta revisão ressalta a natureza transformadora das reformas neoliberais sobre a educação e a necessidade do uso de teorias de resistência e poder que ajudam a esclarecer, por vezes profundamente transformadoras, como tais iniciativas podem provocar e apontar possíveis contra-discursos e condutas alternativas.

Palavras-chave: líder escolar; reforma educacional neoliberal; resistência; revisão de escopo

How School Leaders Navigate Neoliberal Education Reform: A Scoping Review

In recent decades, educational systems worldwide have undergone significant transformation under the influence of neoliberal ideology (Schmeichel et al., 2017). Neoliberalism, as an economic and political doctrine, advocates for the primacy of market forces, privatisation, and individual responsibility (Ball, 2003, 2017). Regarding education, neoliberal reforms can be seen in various ways, including the expansion of school choice, standardised testing, and accountability measures and the promotion of competition between both nations and schools (Ball, 2017; Sahlberg, 2016). Critics argue that these reforms exacerbate inequalities, undermine democratic values, and prioritise economic imperatives over educational goals (Ball, 2003, 2017; Stacey, 2017). International testing such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and league tables are quintessential neoliberal mechanisms that systematically compare and rank educational systems. This has led to a growth in government responses aimed at improving student outcomes, often by prioritising measurable targets and market-driven performance indicators (McLure & Aldridge, 2022; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). The cost in time and money in connection to these endeavours are enormous (Bolden & Tymms, 2020; McLure & Aldridge, 2022).

School leaders are at the forefront of negotiating and implementing neoliberal education reforms (Tseng, 2015). Charged with the task of navigating complex policy landscapes, balancing competing demands, and fostering educational excellence, school leaders play a pivotal role in the educational system (Aldrige & McLure, 2023; Tseng, 2015). In the review, I use the broad term school leader to encompass both headteachers/principals as well as deputy/vice headteachers/principals in compulsory education.

School leaders' responses to neoliberal reform are shaped by a myriad of factors, including contextual constraints, institutional pressures, and personal beliefs (Aldrige & McLure, 2023). Niesche (2013) emphasises that it is vital 'to engage with empirical examples to bring these tensions to life' (p. 145). Similarly, Schmeichel et al. (2017) point out that although there is a vast and important body of work that critically examines policy, higher education, and the school system in general from a critical perspective, it usually does not explore the experience of local actors or provide close-up examples of how prevailing discourses of neoliberalism have been deployed in education. The local actors' perspective is important to highlight in a neoliberal era where governing is conducted at a distance and through 'the conduct of conduct' (Foucault, 2000, p. 341).

In this scoping review, I explore how school leaders navigate the tensions and challenges inherent in neoliberal education reforms and more explicitly how they might respond in terms of resistance. The review also highlights potential changes in the school leaders' professional identity. To my knowledge, no existing reviews focus specifically on school leaders' responses to neoliberal education reforms. The aim of this scoping review is thus to analyse empirical studies investigating school leaders' responses to neoliberal education reforms. I included studies based on interviews, observations, or surveys, and excluded those relying solely on policy documents. Three questions guide the study:

- What is the extent and nature of the empirical research on school leaders' responses to neoliberal education reform?
- How can these responses be understood using resistance theory?
- How have the neoliberal reforms affected school leaders' professional identities?

By answering these questions, the review helps clarify the challenges school leaders face in navigating and resisting neoliberal education policies, highlighting areas for further research. In the

review, I explore the complex interplay between neoliberal education reforms and the lived experiences of school leaders, who are tasked with implementing these policies.

Neoliberal education reforms are not abstract trends; they have tangible consequences that shape daily school practices. As Apple (2017) points out, neoliberal educational change policies risk altering the way we think about education and its role in society. Understanding their impact on practitioners like school leaders is therefore crucial.

This review is timely and significant, offering insights into how macro-level policies (e.g., high-stakes standardised testing mandates; policies promoting school choice and competition) translate into micro-level experiences (e.g., school leaders reallocating resources to test preparation; school leaders engaging in marketing their school). By mapping existing studies on school leaders' lived experiences under neoliberal reforms, it provides valuable knowledge for policymakers, educational leaders, and researchers seeking to navigate and influence these ongoing transformations.

Neoliberalism and Education

Scholars have widely debated the concept of neoliberalism; with some arguing that its broad application has rendered it meaningless in the social sciences (Venugopal, 2015). However, others contend that neoliberalism remains a valuable framework for analysing education reform, as it highlights the economic, political, and social forces shaping contemporary educational policies and practices (Ball, 2003). This review adopts the latter perspective, emphasising how neoliberal influences shape education reform and impact school leaders.

Researchers categorise neoliberalism in various ways, often emphasising its ideological, policy-driven, and governance-related aspects (Harvey, 2005; Ward & England, 2007). Larner (2000) identifies three key conceptualisations: neoliberalism as policy, ideology, and governmentality. As policy, neoliberalism supports the unregulated functioning of markets, influencing government priorities around economic efficiency and global competitiveness (Larner, 2000; Schmeichel et al., 2017). As ideology, neoliberalism, drawing on Gramscian theory, prioritises individualism, limits state intervention, and promotes corporate interests (Hall, 2011; Schmeichel et al., 2017).

A Foucauldian perspective views neoliberalism as governmentality, shifting governance from the state to individuals through market-driven rationality. This approach frames individuals as *Homo economicus*, self-regulating actors responsible for their own success (Foucault, 2008, p. 226). In education, neoliberalism positions schooling as a means of producing human capital, aligning education with economic priorities rather than public good (Ball, 2017). Unlike traditional governance relying on direct control, neoliberalism shapes individuals as active participants in its mechanisms, fostering a new type of subject or citizen (Foucault, 2007).

While neoliberal governance aims to minimise state intervention, it does not eliminate control (Dean, 2002; Foucault, 2000). Instead, individuals internalise responsibility, becoming self-disciplined actors within the system (Olssen, 2003). This is evident in education through the rhetoric of continuous improvement, market-driven professionalism, and the increasing reliance on digital technologies to standardise and intensify performance expectations (Evetts, 2009; Watson & Michael, 2016). Anderson and Cohen (2015) describe this shift as forcing educators to prioritise test-based accountability over professional expertise and collaboration. Furthermore, digital technologies exacerbate this trend by standardising processes and intensifying expectations of local school actors. Consequently, school leaders face entrepreneurial expectations, often leading to competition and resource imbalances within the education system, which then undermines overall system capacity.

Neoliberal reforms in education typically unfold through incremental changes rather than major legislative shifts (Ball, 2017). These gradual transformations normalise market-driven policies, embedding them into the educational landscape under the guise of economic necessity. According to

Ball, it is not the individual initiatives themselves, viewed in isolation, that reveal the true extent of change. Rather, it is the collective impact of numerous alterations over time that transforms the policy landscape, rendering the present state unrecognisable when compared to the past. In sum, neoliberalism in education fosters school competition, promotes school choice, prioritises standardised testing and accountability, and integrates private sector management strategies into public education.

Two reviews address the impact of neoliberalism on education in general, not focusing on school leaders specifically. Schmeichel et al. (2017) conducted an integrative, theoretical literature review of the empirical research on neoliberalism in United States P–12 education primarily concentrating on teachers and students. Schmeichel et al. (2017) conclude that the empirical body of research literature engaging with neoliberalism in the U.S. context is inadequate. They found that there was quite an extensive literature dealing with textual analysis from a neoliberal perspective, but there were few researchers who focused on neoliberal influences on school actors in real-life settings. Robinson (2019) reaches a similar conclusion in his review examining educational research regarding the role that 'information and communications technologies have played in the neoliberalisation of education across the globe' (p. 1). He points out the need for more research using empirical data on the effects of neoliberalised educational technologies in practice – to engage with those who are affected and not merely to scrutinise policy.

While Schmeichel et al. (2017) and Robinson (2019) provide valuable insights into the impact of neoliberalism on education, my review distinguishes itself by synthesising empirical research on school leaders' responses to neoliberal education reforms. By providing a comprehensive overview of existing studies, it identifies key research gaps and offers insights into the micro-level enactment of neoliberal reforms, contributing to a deeper understanding of their implications for school leadership and policy development.

Theorising Resistance

In this review, I apply resistance theory to explore how school leaders navigate neoliberal reforms. I did not begin this review with a fixed framework for analysis. Resistance was part of possible responses to neoliberal change, but I did not exclusively search for resistance as a response (see Table 2 in the method's section for key words). However, during the phase of scanning the articles for the review, I noted recurrent instances of symbolic refusals, strategic compliance, and non-compliance. These patterns resonated most closely with resistance theory's emphasis on power, agency, and the micro-politics of institutional life. Thus, resistance theory did not simply confirm pre-existing expectations but emerged organically as the most coherent and generative framework for explaining how—and why—school leaders actively shape, reinterpret, and sometimes subvert neoliberal mandates. Resistance theory offers a powerful lens for capturing both overt and covert acts of defiance that traditional organisational or policy-implementation frameworks tend to overlook. While institutional theory, for example, emphasises how schools conform to external pressures by adopting new practices, and organisational change models focus on strategies for managing reform, neither adequately foregrounds the subtle, relational tactics through which school leaders navigate neoliberal reforms. By centering resistance, this analysis opens a window onto the nuanced ways school leaders engage with—and at times contest—neoliberal mandates.

Resistance has been conceptualised in diverse ways, from overt defiance to more subtle, everyday acts that challenge dominant power structures. While early theories emphasised large-scale, organised resistance—such as protests, strikes, and political activism (Gramsci, 1971; Scott, 1985)—more recent scholarship has expanded the concept to include covert and discursive forms of resistance embedded within everyday practices (Foucault, 1982; Vinthagen & Johansson, 2013). This

shift is particularly relevant in neoliberal contexts, where power is exercised less through direct coercion and more through discourse, governance, and market-driven rationalities (Ball, 2000; Olssen, 2003).

A central debate in resistance theory concerns the role of agency and intentionality. Scott's (1985) notion of 'weapons of the weak' highlights how individuals resist through everyday acts such as foot-dragging, feigned ignorance, and subtle subversion. However, this view has been critiqued for overly emphasising individual agency. Vinthagen and Johansson (2013) argue that resistance does not always require a conscious actor; rather, resistance can emerge through actions that unintentionally disrupt power structures. Similarly, Foucault's (1982) perspective on power and governmentality suggests that resistance is not external to power but is always entangled within it. This means that compliance and adaptation can also be analysed as forms of resistance, as they contribute to the negotiation and reproduction of power relations.

Ball (2000) further explores how power can be both challenged and reproduced simultaneously. He discusses the concepts of performativity and fabrication as mechanisms of both resistance and submission within the neoliberal system. Fabrication functions dually as a form of resistance while simultaneously reinforcing the very system it seeks to oppose. Performativity and fabrication also lead to the exclusion of other things 'which do not "fit" into what is intended to be represented or conveyed' (Ball, 2000, p. 9). This dual nature of resistance—as both compliance and opposition—is crucial for understanding how school leaders navigate neoliberal constraints.

Ball et al. (2012) discuss the problem of recognising resistance in educational settings. Much of the older resistance theory has been occupied with grand gestures, such as rebellion and strikes (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004; Vinthagen & Johansson, 2013), but an equally important question is whether personal unease, avoidance, murmuring and indifference can be seen as resistance (Ball et al., 2012). There is also the possibility that resistance can lead to oppressive outcomes (Giroux, 1983). Similarly, accommodation implies acceptance, which reproduces existing power dynamics. In a Foucauldian sense this is the very core of governmentality and can be analysed as resistance.

McGee (2016) argues that much resistance theory overlooks the influence of norms, culture, and discourse—an omission particularly relevant in neoliberal societies, where power, according to Baaz et al. (2023), operates differently than in the Fordist era. However, Lilja (2022) notes that resistance theory increasingly recognises 'hidden agency' (p. 202), broadening the scope of what constitutes resistance in a context where power is diffuse and intertwined with various institutions and discourses, making it both challenging to identify and oppose.

In this scoping review, I use the resistance concept to refer to individual resistance, differentiating between different ways of expressing resistance and non-resistance (cf. Foucault, 1978). Although typologies can be a crude measure, for clarity I will categorise the school leaders' responses according to the four types outlined in Table 1.

Table 1

Types of Resistance

Type of Resistance	Examples/Explanation
Overt	Publicly speaking your mind/doing differently
Covert	Less public oppositional practices in terms of irony, murmuring, acts of foot dragging
Simulation	Seemingly compliant, acts of fabrication, game playing
Compliance	Aligning with power whether for career advancement or belief in reforms

The school leaders do not need to explicitly identify their actions as resistance. My focus is on researchers' recognition and analysis of observed or narrated acts; I will not attempt to analyse the actors' consciousness or intentions. Analysing resistance is as complex as analysing power (Johansson & Vinthagen, 2016), yet equally important if we are to understand the impact of the current neoliberal reform climate.

Method

A scoping review summarises available literature on a topic (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005) and provides an overview of its focus, the amount of research available, and gaps in knowledge (Munn et al., 2018). While scoping reviews share systematic reviews' emphasis on being 'systematic, transparent, and replicable' (Grant & Booth, 2009, p. 101), they address broader, more topic focused research questions (Wang, 2019).

I used the five-stage framework of Arksey and O'Malley (2005): (1) identifying the research question; (2) identifying relevant studies; (3) study selection; (4) charting the data; and (5) collating, summarising, and reporting the results. I used a PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) flow diagram for scoping reviews detailing identification, screening and inclusion of articles as to give the reader a clear overview of the search process (Page et al., 2021, adapted from Moher et al., 2009).

Keyword Selection

I began the search process by identifying keywords and synonyms. My initial keywords were school leader, neoliberalism and education reform. In the search string, I included 'New Public Management' (NPM) since the concept is sometimes associated with neoliberalism. However, as Triantafillou (2017) and others have argued, NPM and neoliberalism are not identical. For an article to be included in the review, there had to be a clear connection to neoliberalism, for example, the term neoliberalism or synonyms used in the database searches (see Table 2) must be acknowledged by the author/s of the article.

I opted for a wider search with synonyms to educational reform. I did this to avoid overlooking important research. My interest was empirical research only (i.e., studies that included interviews, observations, or surveys, excluding pure policy studies), but I chose to not use these words in the search string as it greatly reduced the returned results. Instead, I only used this as an inclusion/exclusion criterion when screening the results. For the exact search words used, see Table 2.

Table 2

Search Words

Keywords	Synonyms
Neoliberal	(neoliberal* OR neo-liberal* OR "neo liberal*" OR NPM OR "new public management" OR GERM OR "Global education reform movement")
Education reform	("school improvement" OR "school development" OR "education* change" OR "education* development" OR "Large?scale school improvement*" OR "large?scale school development" OR "System* change*" OR "school wide reform*" OR "school improvement grant*" OR "whole school reform*" OR "school reform" OR "comprehensive school reform*" OR "system* wide reform" OR "district wide reform" OR "systemic reform" OR "national

Keywords	Synonyms
	reform" OR "national initiative" OR "education* reform" OR "whole school change" OR "education* improvement" OR "education* development" OR "state-initiated school reform" OR "state-initiated school improvement" OR "state-initiated school development" OR "policy change" OR "policy implementation" OR "policy enactment" OR "education policy" OR "policy response" OR "policy experience" OR "policy resistance")
School leader	(principal* OR headteacher* OR head-teacher* OR "head teacher*" OR school- leader* OR "school leader*" OR leadership OR "school principal*" OR "school leadership" OR "educational leadership")

Searching the Databases and Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria

I used ERIC (ProQuest) as the primary database for the search because it is the main database within the field of education. I also conducted searches in Scopus, Social Science Premium, and Web of Science because of their broad range, including different fields within the social sciences, especially Scopus and Social Science Premium. I limited the search to journal articles in English, published between 2004 and March 2024. These limitations followed Grant and Booth's (2009) recommendation that included literature should be recent and peer reviewed. Limitations were also used in ERIC regarding school stages. The review targets compulsory schooling and thus excludes pre-school and higher education settings (see Table 3). In the other three databases the limitations regarding school stages are not available; however in Social Science Premium it is possible to de-select universities and colleges in the subject field.

I combined the search words into search strings using Boolean operators. I used wildcards to capture variations in spelling, word endings, and both singular and plural forms. I do not claim to have identified all research available on the topic, as there may be limitations in my search words. I assessed the studies found in the searches against six inclusion criteria, summarised in Table 3.

Table 3

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Criterion	Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Population	School leaders Principals/Headteachers (primarily)	Pre-service teachers Teacher educators Student teachers Teachers School administrators (District) policy makers
Context	Primary school Elementary school Middle school Secondary school Upper secondary school High school Junior high school	Post-secondary education Higher education Vocational education College education Early childhood education Pre-school Kindergarten

Criterion	Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Item type	Empirical Journal article In English Full text available	Reviews Conceptual articles Conference papers Not in English No full text available
Data	Interview, observation, survey, documents/policy only if combined with at least one of the above	Pure policy analysis, articles not including any data other than documents/policy
Focus	School leaders' responses to educational reform	Focus lies on a concept not in line with change factors (e.g. leadership style) or focuses on teachers' response to reform
Setting	Neoliberal education reform	Does not place the reform in a neoliberal setting

Note: see Poekert et al. (2020)

Selection and Charting the Data

I conducted data selection and extraction in three stages. In the first stage, I imported search results (n=905) into Covidence TM (Covidence systematic review software, 2019) and removed duplicates (n=452). The PRISMA flow diagram for study selection is presented in Figure 1 in the Appendix. I then checked the titles and abstracts to determine whether they met the inclusion and exclusion criteria outlined above. After the initial title and abstract scan 140 articles remained. At this stage, I retained abstracts that met at least three inclusion criteria. Notably not many abstracts contained a clear connection to school leaders' responses to reform, so at the scanning of abstract stage this criterion did not need to be clearly fulfilled. Next, I skimmed the remaining 140 articles, primarily looking for a connection to neoliberalism and school leaders' responses to change, but the other three criteria were also borne in mind (data, item type, context). If the article did not meet all inclusion criteria at this stage, I excluded it. The reasons for exclusion can be multiple, but Covidence only allows one to be selected, and thus I mainly focused on whether the article focused on school leaders' responses to reform. After skimming 140 articles I selected 14 for extraction. At this stage, I also proceeded with manual citation searching in the retrieved articles. I screened 41 additional articles as a result. These additional searches yielded seven more articles, for a total of 21 articles that met all the inclusion criteria.

Regarding the data analysis, I initially charted the articles for key information about the study and specific information about the school leaders' responses to neoliberal education reform and changes in professional identity (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). To answer the research questions, I conducted both descriptive and content analyses on the 21 selected studies, as recommended for scoping reviews (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). In the descriptive analysis I considered the country where the research was conducted, the actors, the improvement initiative, the school level, the methodological approach and the theory used. I conducted the content analysis inductively, focusing more specifically on how the researchers analysed how the school leaders responded to the reform initiatives using the model of resistance types presented in the previous section. I also conducted a

content analysis regarding how the neoliberal reforms affected the professional identities of the school leaders.

Findings

Nature of the Reviewed Articles

In this section I provide a concise overview of the reviewed articles resulting from a descriptive analysis. I categorised the articles based on the following criteria: author and year, actors and country, education reform initiative, school year, data and method. Additionally, a brief summary of the various theoretical frameworks employed in the articles will also be presented.

I identified studies from 10 different countries, as shown in Table 4, with Australia (*n*=5) and the US (*n*=5) being the most prominently featured. This observation is consistent with the prevalence of significant education reform in these countries (Anderson & Cohen, 2015; Ball, 2019). Concerning the school years examined, there is a slight dominance towards secondary education (*n*=7), while four studies focus on elementary school settings. Ten of the articles include a combination of school stages. Although all articles incorporate school leaders (and deputy school leaders) as informants, ten studies involve a mix of informants, including teachers, administrators, or superintendents.

Ten articles specify the education reform initiatives under examination. However, 11 articles reference multiple reforms or claim to investigate the general influence of numerous policy reforms in recent years. In the Australian context, the NAPLAN (National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy) initiative is mentioned in all but one article (Gobby et al., 2018; Heffernan, 2016; Longmuir, 2019; Niesche, 2013), while Blackmore's (2004) article predates the initiative. In the US context, the NCLB Act (No Child Left Behind) is mentioned by Cohen (2014), Duarte (2021) and Ylimaki (2012).

Regarding methodology, interviews are the primary method of data collection, with all but one article (Ball & Olmedo, 2013) employing this approach. Of these 20, one study utilises telephone interviews (Ward et al., 2016), while another incorporates both individual and focus group interviews (Blackmore, 2004). Observations are employed in six articles (Blackmore, 2004; Duarte, 2021; Liljenberg, 2015; Longmuir, 2019; Mifsud, 2016a, 2016b), and document studies are conducted in five articles (Duarte, 2021; Longmuir, 2019; Mifsud, 2016a, 2016b; Ward et al., 2016). Additional data sources include surveys (Ward et al., 2016), pictures and field notes (Duarte, 2021), work shadowing (Montecinos et al., 2015), and email conversations (Ball & Olmedo, 2013). Some articles also specify the research approach, with 10 articles adopting a case study approach (e.g., Agbaria et al., 2022; Liljenberg, 2015; Montecinos et al., 2015; Rezai-Rashti & Segeren, 2023). Duarte (2021) and Ylimaki (2012) conduct ethnographic studies, while Pinto (2015) employs a phenomenological approach.

I found that Foucault was the most frequently cited theorist in the reviewed articles, with his work cited as a primary theoretical framework in 13 articles (e.g., Longmuir, 2019; Mifsud, 2016a, 2016b; Ward et al., 2016). Researchers also utilised neoliberalism (*n*=4), performativity (*n*=3) and NPM (*n*=3) as theoretical lenses, besides being part of a general framing of the studies. However, other theoretical perspectives are more sporadically referenced. Notably, only two articles, besides some employing a Foucauldian lens, explicitly state the use of a theory of resistance. Fuller (2019) employs post-colonial theorisation of resistance, and Longmuir (2019), in addition to Foucault, incorporates Scott's theories on resistance. Given the criteria of the articles being set in a neoliberal context, the dominance of Foucault's theories was not surprising.

Table 4

Overview of Reviewed Articles (loosely based on Arksey & O'Malley, 2005)

Author/s (year)	Country and Actors	School year	School improvement initiative	Data/Method	Theory
Agbaria et al. (2022)	Israel, principal, deputy principal, coordinators and teachers	Junior high school	New Horizon	Case study, interviews	Micropolitics
Ball & Olmedo (2013)	England, US, mixed	Mixed	General/multiple	E-mail conversations	Foucault, resistance
Blackmore (2004)	Australia, principals and teachers	Primary and secondary school	General, mentions Schools of the Future	Case study (4), interviews, focus groups, observations	Education as political /emotional work, performativity
Bernstein et al. (2021)	US, principals and public administrators	Elementary school	School choice and dual language bilingual education policies	Two studies, interviews	Neoliberalism market-based reforms, gentrification of bilingual education
Cohen (2014)	US, principals	High school	General, NCLB and RTTT are mentioned	Interviews	Foucault disciplinary power
Collet-Sabé (2017)	Spain (Catalonia), headteachers	Primary school	School indicator system (SIS)	Interviews	Neoliberalism, Foucault
Duarte (2021)	US, principal, teachers and instructional coaches	Elementary school	Multiple	Ethnography, observations, interviews, documents, pictures, field notes	Governmentality
Fuller (2019)	England, headteachers	Primary and secondary school	Multiple	Interviews	Post-colonial theorisation of resistance, resistance theory
Gobby et al. (2018)	Australia, principals and deputy principals	Primary and secondary school	Independent Public Schools (IPS) (NAPLAN mentioned)	Case study, interviews	Neoliberalism (Foucault), performativity, accountability
Heffernan (2016)	Australia, principals and departmental staff	Primary school	United in our Pursuit of Excellence, NAPLAN	Case study, interviews	Performativity, discipline and governmentality
Liljenberg (2015)	Sweden, principals and school directors	Compulsory school	General	Case study, interviews, observations	Institutional theory, coupling strategies

Author/s (year)	Country and Actors	School year	School improvement initiative	Data/Method	Theory
Longmuir (2019)	Australia, principal	Secondary school	General, NAPLAN	Case study, interviews, observations, documents	Foucault, Scott
Mifsud (2016a)	Malta, educational leaders and headteachers	Primary and secondary school	For All Children to Succeed (FACT)	Case study, document, interviews, observations	Foucault, discourse, governmentality
Mifsud (2016b)	Malta, educational leaders and headteachers	Primary and secondary school	For All Children to Succeed (FACT)	Case study, document, interviews, observations	Foucault, power, discourse, subjectification
Montecinos et al. (2015)	Chile, principals	Elementary and high school	General/multiple	Case study, interviews, work shadowing	NPM
Niesche (2013)	Australia, principal, deputy principal and teachers	Secondary school	NAPLAN, (MySchool website)	Interviews	Foucault, power, resistance, counter-conduct
Pinto (2015)	Canda (Ontario), school leaders	High school	General/multiple	Phenomenology, interviews	Neoliberal educational policy in layers
Rezai-Rashti & Segeren (2023)	Canda (Ontario & British Columbia), school leaders	High school	General/multiple	Case study, interviews	NPM, governmentality, policy enactment
Ritacco-Real et al. (2022)	Spain (Andalusia), principals	High school	General/multiple	Interviews	NPM and Foucault
Ward et al. (2016)	Scotland, headteachers	Mixed	Leadership Standards for Social Justice in Scotland (GTCS, 2012)	Policy, survey, telephone interviews	Policy and policy response, Foucault
Ylimaki (2012)	US, principals	Middle and elementary school	NCLB	Ethnography, interviews	Educational leadership, curriculum theory, cultural politics

How School Leaders Navigate Neoliberal Reforms

I present the results of the school leaders' responses to educational reform according to the four resistance categories outlined in the theory section: compliance, simulation, covert resistance and overt resistance. This division is purely analytical; in reality these categories overlap and are interconnected.

Compliance

Most articles discuss various forms of resistance or non-resistance taking place simultaneously. However, some discuss the school leaders' responses in terms of aligning with the mandated reform/s. Gobby et al. (2018), examining the Australian context, described two of the school leaders in the study as not only adopting the neoliberal reforms, but also embracing them. These two secondary school leaders viewed audits as 'an opportunity to learn', and 'actively sought audits and accreditation from outside bodies' (p. 166). The Australian context is described in the article as highly competitive. However, Gobby et al. problematise the seemingly compliant acts by the school leaders and describe the school leaders in the study as 'neither fully compliant nor outright resistant' (p. 169). The school leaders to some extent use the spaces for autonomy by moderating the effects of performativity, contextualising external accountability measures (NAPLAN) instead of accepting them at face value. They thus tried to soften the effects of the performative climate for both students and teachers at the same time as the school leaders actively sought different types of accreditations to enhance the competitiveness of the school.

Likewise, Ylimaki (2012) related how two of the school leaders in the U.S.-based study gradually aligned more with the neoliberal discourse, pointing to the eroding effect a commonsense discourse can have on professionals. Ward et al. (2016) came to a similar conclusion in their study concerning Leadership Standards for Social Justice in Scotland. It is difficult to see beyond the present managerial norm, as school leaders in their study displayed consensual opinions regarding ideas about marketisation, such as consumer choice, quality control and standards. Ward et al. comment that some school leaders provided tautological justifications regarding the value of the Standards, 'Standards are important because it is important to have standards' (p. 51).

Liljenberg (2015) found that in the Swedish context, two of the three schools investigated responded to the quality evaluation system with accommodation. Heffernan's (2016) study, focusing on how school leaders are being influenced by school performance data profiles, might also be interpreted as school leaders accommodating to the mandated reforms. The school leaders used the data profile as the benchmark for school improvement. Moreover, the school leaders reported that the data is a major influence on their work, with profiles being instrumental in guiding decisions regarding school priorities and focus areas.

Agbaria et al. (2022) also portrayed multiple responses to reform. They described compliance in terms of collaboration. The reform implemented is called the New Horizon reform and according to Agbaria et al. (2022) '[i]t resembles reforms in other countries, aiming at increasing educational performance, public accountability, and improving teachers' professionalism' (p. 188). The school leader in the study stood behind the reform and the evaluation and accountability that follows it. The school leader saw the reform as a means to uphold the school's reputation as well as controlling the teachers' work. There are also elements of bargaining, both from the school leader and teachers. The reform places a lot of pressure on the school and on the teachers and the school leader tried to balance the requirements of the reform and the teachers' demands. There was a struggle to adapt the reform to the school, but also the other way around, to adapt the school to the reform. The school leader described the reform as being hard to hide from. 'Everyone sees and evaluates everyone' (p. 194).

Simulation

I identified various forms of simulation in the reviewed articles, such as playing the game (Bernstein et al., 2021; Fuller, 2019; Rezai-Rashti & Segeren, 2023) and fabrication (Collet-Sabé, 2017; Rezai-Rashti & Segeren, 2023). Fuller (2019) analysed school leaders' everyday resistance to education reforms and concluded that the basic resistance for school leaders appeared to be flight.

The acts of simulation that Fuller presented are game playing, selectivity, masquerade and reinvention. An example of masquerade is one school leader expressing that she 'aimed to influence politicians from inside the system by masking her opposition with compliance' (p. 43). The school leaders in Fuller's study played the game to manage school performance tables to present their schools in the best light. Playing the game, however, reinforced the validity of the game and 'keeping customers happy' (Bernstein et al., 2021, p. 395; cf. Ball, 2000). Blackmore (2004) analysed the simulation as a tension between 'doing good' for your students and being seen to 'be good' (p. 456) in a performative climate. Ultimately, however, the pressure of performativity produces increased compliance. The school leaders' resistance led to acceptance with time and disempowerment in the face of centrally mandated reform.

School leaders in Liljenberg's (2015) study both accommodate and assimilate to reforms. At times the school leaders reinterpret the requirements and 'do not take external demands as absolute rules' (Liljenberg, 2015, p. 465). This is interpreted as a form of assimilation by Liljenberg. The school leaders in Liljenberg's study thus responded differently to different policy demands. Rezai-Rashti and Segeren (2023), on the other hand, compared two regions in Canada, Ontario and British Columbia, and found different results in regard to the school leaders' way of navigating the policy demands. Ontario is depicted as a high-pressure accountability environment and school leaders here showed signs of gaming the system, fabricating data to get around the system or to support a specific agenda. One principal explained that:

> a lot of schools will play the game. If you have kids that are weak in math, you'll put them into the essentials courses because those kids don't have to write EQAO [the Educational Quality and Accountability Office]. Then the school has a higher score. (Rezai-Rashti & Segeren, 2023, p. 270)

This was not seen in the British Columbia region; on the contrary, school leaders here openly manifested their criticism towards the testing-regime. The pressure and demands were lower in the British Columbia region, allowing school leaders more space for alternative actions than in the Ontario setting.

Covert Resistance

Covert resistance likewise takes many shapes and forms. Ritaco-Real and Segeren (2022) examined resistance in terms of taking care of the self. They saw ethical reflection as a way to create spaces for resistance. In their study the expressions of resistance take the form of frustration, disappointment, discomfort and stress. Similarly, Pinto (2015) described feelings of frustration, disconnectedness and dissatisfaction with the sheer volume of policy among the school leaders. One of the school leaders claim 'It's really hard to stay on top of all the policies' (p. 145).

Blackmore (2004) presented resistance expressing itself as frustration, anger and guilt. These emotions were connected to feelings of not being able to do what was perceived as best for the students. Demoralisation and grief are other terms used by Blackmore. One school leader even described the emotions in war terms: 'I can't win the war, but I can make sure that this school survives' (Blackmore, 2004, p. 447). In Collet-Sabé's (2017) study two of the senior school leaders are slightly hardened after years of experience and spoke somewhat ironically of the bureaucratic requirements as well as displaying acts of foot dragging by, for instance, handing in forms to the Education Department late.

Pinto (2015) highlighted that school leaders avoided overt resistance due to fear of losing their job or valuing their 'paycheck' (p. 149). There were also indications that newer school leaders engaged in overt resistance to a lesser degree in the case examples (Collet-Sabé, 2017; Fuller, 2019). This can be due to many reasons, such as experience giving one the courage to think differently: as

an experienced school leader in Fuller's (2019) study expressed, 'What can they do, sack me?' (p. 47). Other reasons are also discussed in the studies, for example the contracts and hiring of school leaders (Montecinos et al., 2015), and the general common sense of adopting neoliberalism (e.g., Ball & Olmedo, 2013; Ward et al., 2016). How does one think outside what is currently believed to be common sense (Ward et al., 2016)? Several of the authors conclude that even though there might be some resistance along the way, compliance is the ultimate result (e.g., Agabaria et al., 2022; Duarte, 2021). Pinto (2015) even calls it fear-driven compliance.

Overt Resistance

Only a few of the studies reported overt forms of resistance. Ball and Olmedo (2013) analysed an email exchange between school leaders and teachers and Ball himself as an overt form of resistance. They saw speaking your mind and opposing the discourse of neoliberalism and its technologies as overt resistance. Sharing one's professional discomforts in different contexts was seen as a way to recognise a different relation to power and open up 'spaces of doubt' (p. 93). This in turn could lead to more overt forms of resistance such as refusal or collective actions. Likewise, two of the school leaders in Ylimaki's (2012) study overtly opposed what they see as the detrimental effects of standards and teaching to the test. The two school leaders became increasingly critical of current curriculum discourses and started curriculum discussion groups that included students, teachers and parents.

Fuller (2019) describes how two school leaders openly resisting reforms in external meetings, displaying counter-discourse. This came at a cost, however, with one school leader saying he was treated like 'the village idiot' (p. 40) in external meetings. In the article by Niesche (2013) the school leader used silencing as a counter-conduct by openly confessing that she did not refer to mandated frameworks, that were seen as removed from 'the day-to-day practice' (p. 154) by the school leader. The school leader used the same governmentality technique in connection to MySchool, a website where the school performance data is published. By using silencing, the school leader creates 'space for other issues she thinks are important such as the explicit philosophy of caring for and supporting the students emotionally' (p. 152).

One out of nine school leaders in Cohen's (2014) study also overtly resisted the pressure from the district in competing with high performing schools, which he did not see as fair to his students nor as working in their favour. The school leader expressed frustration over the business-like manner with which schools are run, which defines students as 'numbers' or 'products', and he openly spoke about his main concerns being the 'social/emotional part of a kid' (p. 18). This is seen as counter-conduct by Cohen.

Longmuir (2019) also provided an account of counter-conduct. The school leader in the case study openly defied the norms of traditional school leadership and school improvement of the policy context by, for example, removing grade levels and introducing flexible start and finish times for students. He also paid little attention to teacher improvement, a feature normally in focus in both policy and practice according to Longmuir. The school leader's vision of the school was centred on the students, not the staff. Finally, the school leader also resisted seeking support from staff in regard to implementing new ideas. The rate of change is described by Longmuir as 'very fast paced, reactive and often experimental' (p. 265). Longmuir's case is an example of not adhering to current neoliberal trends, but it is also an example of resistance not always leading to positive outcomes for all, as the school leader's 'ruthless commitment to his vision' (p. 267) led to severe consequences for some of the staff. Longmuir concludes that, ironically, this resistance to traditional school leadership led to 'autocratic actions' by the school leader 'that to some degree dominated, silenced and governed' (p. 267; cf. Giroux, 1983) the staff at the school.

Changes in Professional Identities

The reforms implemented in the reviewed studies also affected the professional roles and the way the school leaders perceived themselves. The change in the role of the school leaders can be described in terms of changed policy. Several articles depict school leaders experiencing reduced autonomy, despite many reforms promising greater independence. With the promised autonomy, however, comes stringent surveillance; increased managerial tasks and competition with neighbouring schools and colleagues are also factors that change the work environment for school leaders. This is especially true for secondary schools to a higher degree than primary schools. If the performance criteria are not met several authors report that the school leader faces the risk of being fired or losing out on career advancement (e.g., Agabaria et al., 2022; Cohen et al., 2014; Montecinos et al., 2015; Pinto, 2015).

Overall, there is a tension between autonomy and control (e.g., Heffernan, 2016; Mifsud 2016a, 2016b; Montecinos et al., 2015). In the Maltese case the mandated FACT policy has led to new hierarchical structures. Regarding promised autonomy, one school leader expressed: 'Autonomy? I still have to see it being born! I cannot even organize Prize Day the way I like – it has to conform to the Principal's standards and be similar to that of the other college schools' (Mifsud, 2016b, p. 105)[1]. Likewise, Mifsud (2016a) concludes that the school leaders in the study 'accept policy as enforced and non-negotiable, with the erosion of their professional autonomy in the meantime' (p. 460).

Many studies also describe the roles of school leaders as managers (e.g., Agbaria et al., 2022; Collet-Sabé, 2017; Ritacco-Real et al., 2022) or as entrepreneurs (e.g., Gobby et al., 2018; Montecinos et al., 2015; Rezai-Rashti & Segeren, 2023) with common features mentioned being marketing, enrolment and competing for funds. Agbaria et al. (2022) reported that the school leader had adopted the role of the manager. He was a mediator between the Ministry of Education and the teaching staff. New responsibilities and duties were thus added to the school leader's desk and the reforms meant an increased workload. Bernstein et al. (2021) focused on competition, which played a significant role in the daily work of school leaders. As one of the school leaders say:

> We're 61 percent open enrollment, and we live in the age of choice. And so I know a lot of us will say the PC [politically correct] thing, "Oh, we're not in competition." Bullshit. We're in competition with each other. We really are. Because the more kids we pull in, yes, it looks better for our schools. We get more money; we can offer more. (Bernstein et al., 2021, p. 396)

This reflects Ball and Olmedo's (2013) comment that neoliberal technologies work by making productive and enterprising employees.

Reforms are also perceived as unclear, creating insecurities among staff that school leaders need to handle (Agbaria et al., 2022; Pinto, 2015). The sheer volume of reforms is also something that greatly affected the school leaders' work situation and put the school leaders in precarious positions where they need to prioritise and select among policies and directives (Fuller, 2019; Pinto, 2015). One school leader in Mifsud's study phrased it as orders come from all around and they just 'receive, receive, receive' (Mifsud, 2016a, p. 455). Pinto (2015) points out that little is known about how this policy layering affects school leaders: the amount of stress and pressure it creates, how school leaders cope and what it might do to their professional identity.

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[1] Maltese primary and secondary state schools are geographically clustered into 10 colleges. The college is led by a principal.

Regarding professional identities, Ylimaki (2012) saw two types of curriculum leadership emerging: new professional curriculum leadership incorporating the dominant discourses about 'data-driven decision making and skills-based standardized curricula' (p. 321); and critical curriculum leadership, speaking out against and 'question[ing] circulating discourses related to standardization, back-to-basics, and competition' (p. 329). Two of the four school leaders in Ylimaki's study aligned to the latter and 'made conscious choices to engage their students in community-based curriculum development processes that circulated counterdiscourses and inspired neoprogressive educational and social movement' (p. 329). The other two school leaders aligned with the dominant discourses.

Two articles stand out as giving different accounts regarding professional identities (disregarding Longmuir [2019] which I described under overt resistance). A school leader in Cohen's (2014) study consciously tried to avoid the language of neoliberalism and its effect on leadership, and even corrects himself midsentence: 'I'm going to do what's right in making sure we service our kids– I hate to use the word "service" because that sounds like corporate, too–in making sure our kids are properly prepared' (p. 18). However, Cohen (2014) reports that public relations is seen as an essential part of the school leaders' work, and while some embrace it and are proud of it, others express frustration, it has nevertheless become a very large part of the school leaders' work to make sure the school has a positive image to ensure enrolment and funding whether they agree with this or not. This affects the school leaders' identities by pushing them towards the role of the manager.

Liljenberg (2015) gives a rather more hopeful account regarding the professional identity of the school leaders in the Swedish setting and how they manage to balance external demands with democratic professionalism. Notions of professional responsibility and democratic values continue to guide the school leaders' actions, with little evidence of managerial accountability. Almost all of the studies, however, conclude that the neoliberal reforms implemented had changed the school leaders' professional identities and subjectivities in profound ways. The role of the manager has taken over, sidelining the role of curriculum leader, or relegating the social aspect of schooling to the sideline (e.g., Agbaria, et al., 2022; Duarte, 2021; Niesche, 2013; Ritacco-Real et al., 2022). Finally, Montecinos et al. (2015) make an important argument regarding the issue of placing the burden of resisting on the individual school leader:

> Our findings exemplify some of the problems of the 'new professionalism' fashioned by educational laws seeking to steer the work of school leaders in the competitive school marketplace. To avoid proposing individual solutions to address structural problems, the agency of public school principals to change this model should not be overstated. From the safety of the academy, it is irresponsible for us to suggest that principals jeopardize their jobs by engaging in active resistance or by ignoring performance targets. (Montecinos et al., 2015, p. 19)

Concluding Remarks – Consequences of Neoliberal Reform

This review has examined how school leaders navigate neoliberal education reforms, synthesising findings from a range of empirical studies. While much of the existing research has explored the broader impact of neoliberal policies on education, particularly through policy analysis (see Robinson, 2019; Schmeichel et al., 2017), this review offers a more focused examination of how school leaders respond to these reforms in different contexts. By synthesising these studies, we gain a clearer understanding of the tensions school leaders face—balancing neoliberal mandates that prioritise accountability and efficiency and their professional commitments to equity, student well-being, and instructional leadership. As pointed out in the introduction, school leaders play a pivotal role in navigating educational reforms (Aldridge & McLure, 2023; Tseng, 2015).

The Scope and Nature of the Reviewed Articles and the Study's Limitations

Most of the studies reviewed are recent, with all but two published between 2013 and 2023. This may suggest a growing academic interest in critically examining neoliberal reforms as they continue to shape education globally (Ball, 2017; Sahlberg, 2016). The most frequently studied contexts are Australia and the U.S., both characterised by intense policy activity and rapid educational reform (Ball, 2019). However, neoliberal reforms are not limited to these regions but represent a global phenomenon affecting educational leadership worldwide (Sahlberg, 2016).

Regarding theoretical frameworks, Foucault's work dominates discussions of neoliberalism in the reviewed studies. While some studies draw on scholars such as Apple, Harvey, and Hursh—who frame neoliberalism through a critical theoretical lens (e.g. Bernstein et al., 2021; Pinto, 2015; Ylimaki, 2012)—others use the term in more general ways to contextualise reform initiatives. Schmeichel et al. (2017) caution that referencing neoliberalism in studies may at times serve as a way for scholars to signal relevance rather than engaging deeply with its mechanisms. While this review does not specifically analyse how neoliberalism is conceptualised in the included studies, I acknowledge the importance of investigating its usage to deepen our understanding of its impact on education.

I acknowledge several potential biases and limitations that may affect the interpretation of my findings (Wang, 2019). First, restricting the search to peer-reviewed articles introduces a publication bias, though this decision was necessary to maintain a manageable scope. Second, as I am the sole researcher conducting the review, selection bias is a potential concern. To mitigate this, I adhered strictly to predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Third, limiting the search to English-language articles may have excluded relevant research published in other languages. Finally, focusing specifically on neoliberalism means that some studies on school leaders' responses to education reforms may have been omitted if the researchers did not explicitly situate their analysis within a neoliberal framework. However, this focus also strengthens the review by allowing for an in-depth examination of how neoliberal policies are navigated by school leaders.

The Impact of Neoliberalism and is Resistance Possible?

Rather than merely identifying neoliberal discourse in educational policy, I synthesise in this review empirical findings on how school leaders negotiate and sometimes resist these reforms. In doing so, it provides a nuanced account of the agency and constraints school leaders experience in neoliberalised education systems.

A key finding across the reviewed studies is that neoliberal accountability reforms have led to a narrowing of the curriculum, prioritising subjects measured in standardised assessments (Agbaria et al., 2022; Fuller, 2019; Gobby et al., 2018). Although this was not the central focus of this review, it remains a significant consequence of neoliberal restructuring. More directly related to school leadership, the studies suggest that neoliberal reforms have reshaped professional roles and identities, reducing autonomy despite promises of greater freedom. Increased managerial tasks, heightened surveillance, competition, and job insecurity have altered the work of school leaders in profound ways. These findings align with Anderson and Cohen's (2015) summary of 'new professionalism' in education.

Beyond these structural changes, I highlight in the review how neoliberal policies exert pressure on school leaders, often suppressing dissent and reinforcing compliance with standardised performance measures (Agbaria et al., 2022). However, some studies suggest pathways for resistance. Cohen (2014) and Fuller (2019) emphasise the importance of fostering critical consciousness and collective action as strategies to challenge neoliberal reforms. Cohen advocates for school leaders to facilitate critical engagement within their schools, while Fuller highlights the need for broader,

collective resistance. Yet, as Ward et al. (2016) caution, neoliberal managerialism often limits the time and space necessary for such critical reflection, making resistance more difficult to sustain.

This review underscores the transformative impact of neoliberal reforms on education and the need to apply theories of resistance and power to understand both their effects and potential counter-discourses (Foucault, 2007; Holloway & Brass, 2018). It also reveals the complex power dynamics at play, where school leaders, even when critical of neoliberal mandates, may unintentionally reinforce the very discourses they seek to resist (Angus, 2004). While this study provides a small piece of the larger puzzle, it reinforces the need for continued research on how neoliberal education reforms shape leadership practices.

This study contributes to broader scholarly discussions by providing an empirical mapping of school leaders' resistance strategies, illuminating the micro-political processes of educational reform, and demonstrating how individual actors navigate systemic pressures. Additionally, it reveals the often-invisible ways power operates within educational institutions. By synthesising empirical studies on this topic, this review contributes to a deeper understanding of these challenges and highlights the need for policies that prioritise meaningful leadership rather than bureaucratic compliance. Addressing these issues is not only crucial for school leaders but also for the students, teachers, and communities they serve.

Future research should further explore collective resistance strategies (see Baaz et al., 2023) and conduct comparative international studies of school leadership responses. Longitudinal studies tracking professional identity transformations, as well as investigations into counter-narratives and alternative governance models, would provide valuable insights. This could offer insights for both scholars and local school actors as well as policymakers seeking alternative approaches to educational governance.

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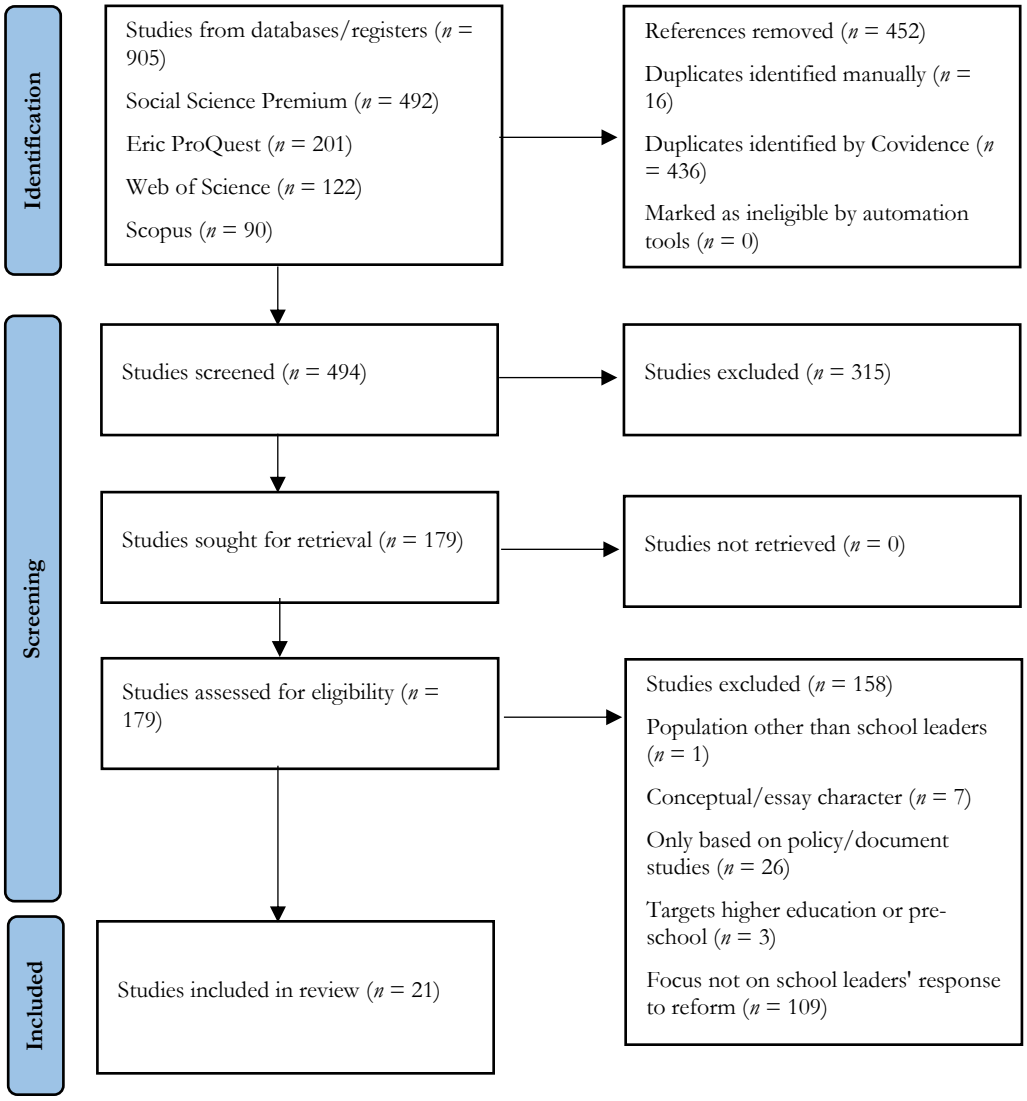
Appendix: PRISMA Flowchart